An Army of Americans Is Obsessed With a Murder

The Ever-Growing Group of Self-Appointed Sleuths into the JFK Assassination is Phenomenal

By Ruth Dean 1/1/78
Washington Star Staff Writer

An extraordinary jigsaw puzzle in which none of the pieces seems to fit.

That, explains one "assassination buff," is what has fascinated him with the investigation into the murder of President John F. Kennedy.

And don't say "buff," protests another of the army of Americans who have become obsessed with the Kennedy murder: "It's a putdown word the media uses. It trivializes our efforts, makes us sound like hobbyists or stamp collectors."

Harold Weisburg, who lives in Frederick, Md., put it this way, when he became annoyed at a reporter's use of the word: "I'm as professional as you are. I've been in intelligence work, a Senate investigator, helped someone win the Pulitzer Prize."

And he's written seven books on the JFK assassination. The first of those was "Whitewash: Report on the Warren Report," an early entry among many books criticizing the government investigation of Kennedy's murder.

The assassination buffs spring mainly from the intelligentsia, but from a number of disciplines — the law, astronomy, philosophy, diplomacy, writing, the theater. The list is endless if you add all the amateur sleuths across the country to the baker's dozen of really serious researchers.

As one of an ever-growing group of self-appointed sleuths in the matter, Weisburg is indeed no lightweight. Fellow researcher Tom Miller calls him "a footnoter," by which he means the kind of researcher "who never (looks) outside solid documentation."

American, I don't regret it. This is not an obsession in the normal sense of the word; it's more a compulsion that I can't stop. Why else, when I have something of worth, do I hold a press conference?"

WEISBURG WAS one of the earliest critics of the Warren Report, and speaks with such fervor about his labors and unsung efforts ("the local papers ignore my books and offers of inside knowledge") that one wonders if conspiracy theorists don't all feel like Cassandras.

Certainly they do share certain characteristics. They are individuals bedeviled with doubts about the published conclusions of official probes of the Kennedy assassination. Ever, in their mind, lurks the double suspicion it "had to be a conspiracy" and "they (government agencies) are holding something back."

Their favorite phrase is that "the Gallup poll showed 80 percent of the American people believed there was a conspiracy, which leaves only about 11 percent who still believe in the tooth fairy, including the U.S. government." By "tooth fairy," of course, is meant the single-assassin conclusion of the Warren Commission.

But outside these similarities, there are many variants among the "buffs" — a word which, Weisburg notwithstanding, is unavoidable.

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The assassination researchers consider themselves real professionals.

Many have written books on the subject, with similar-sounding titles: "Rush to Judgment" (Mark Lane), "Accessories After the Fact" (Sylvia Meagher), "Executive Action" (a "novelistic" approach by Lane and Donald Freed), "The War Conspiracy" (Peter Dale Scott), "Six Seconds in Dallas" (Josiah Thompson), to name a few.

Their critics charge they're making money off of a dead president. But they'll tell you they get hardly enough in royalties to pay publishing costs.

When you talk with them, they sound sincere. They sound anxious to share their thoughts and theories. They want to be believed.

They seem to be humorless. Frivolous thought is not encouraged in their ranks; nor frazzled theory, unless it's backed with volumes of corroborative evidence. They seek out *elusive* facts, which they feel either have been "kept from the public" or "overlooked" by a deadline-harried press.

They deem themselves the final oracle for "what really happened," if for no other reason than that indeed some of them *have* spent 14 years sifting through, comparing and analyzing information, compiling it into books. But if they have the truth, why aren't people rushing to buy it?

THE LATEST OF 200-odd books that have now been published about that day in Dallas is Tom Miller's "The Assassination Please Almanac."

Miller is a native of Washington, son of late Juvenile Court Chief Judge Morris Miller. He now lives in Tucson, and has been working as a free-lance writer for the last 10 years.

He got the idea for his book while living in Austin, near where, one day, he attended an auction of items from Jack Ruby's Carousel Club. He went with the

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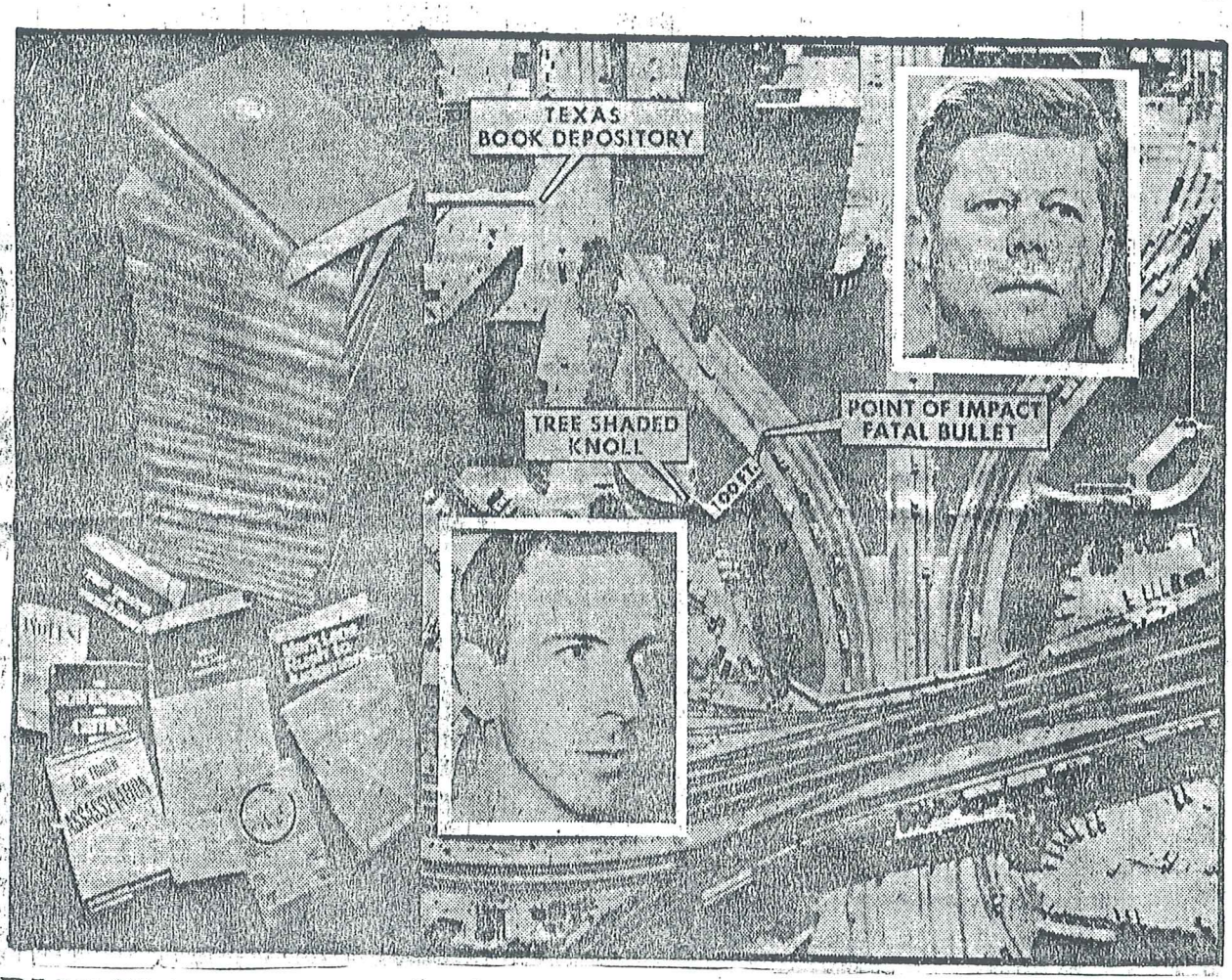
FOR STARTERS, WEISBURG thinks the 40,001 assassination-related documents released by the FBI in November (the second half of the batch is due early this month) are just "window dressing" and contain "little of indigestible (sic) value."

He believes the late FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, "deliberately falsified many of them . . . so he'd have a case to present when an investigation was asked for," and that the FBI "still is holding back" information he feels is relevant in ferreting out "the real story."

Asked if he felt pursuing the truth for so long could become an obsession, Weisburg says: "The Kennedy probe is almost an obsession, but I don't regard this as a whodunit. The assassination of a president is a most subversive crime in a society such as ours. If it is not solved, no president can be free and our institutions are in jeopardy. As a first-generation



PUZZLE

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idea of writing about it: "Who would have the morbid curiosity, besides myself, to attend something like this?" he asked the other day, in a telephone interview. "I was just fascinated by the droves who turned out for it. Scores came. I interviewed people on why they'd come. You know the reason most of them gave? They were buying a piece of American history for their children."

On Nov. 22, 1963, Tom Miller was in the 11th grade in a private school near Olney. Recalling its impact on him now, Miller said, "Washington is a company town, and the head of the company had been slain."

Miller said he regards the slaying as "a cultural phenomenon," and treated it as such in his book "because it is the one subject a farm worker in California can discuss with a Wall Street lawyer. It is the only thing they have to discuss in common."

HE GRANTS THAT the assassination aftermath had its ghoulish manifestations, such as the pair of salt and pepper shakers he saw in Nashville depicting JFK in a rocking chair, with the holes through which to shake the contents perforating the head.

But Miller thinks the hiatus between the demise of the Warren Commission in 1964 and the institution of the present congressional inquiry into the assassination has created a great deal of myth.

"The people wanted to know the truth and all they had to rely on . . . were free-lance sleuths, journalists, the underground press, talk shows and supermarket tabloids like The National Enquirer," Miller said. (He said the Enquirer asked him and other researchers to come to Dallas to attend a seance on one anniversary of the assassination, so they could "learn from two of their ESP (extra-sensory perception) columnists what really happened." He turned down the offer. "I quoted Nixon about the hush money, that I could do it but it would be wrong," he said.)

Miller had kind words for his fellow conspiracy theorists, saying "we keep in touch with each other; I don't think anyone is hogging the stuff."

And he tossed a kudo to the Assassination Information Bureau, an organization which began in Cambridge, Mass., and relocated here in the District, at an 18th Street address, about a year ago. The bureau is, he said, "the most responsible, articulate and rational clearinghouse on the subject."

IT IS THE SECOND such body formed to study assassinations.

The first, the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, was organized by Bernard ("Bud") Fensterwald, a Washington attorney. It is still in business.

"Our feeling is that the FBI had 12-14 years to massage these documents, and that it is doggedly opposed to what Congress is doing," says Fensterwald.

Last May, the Committee to Investigation Assassinations published "Coincidence or Conspiracy," a compilation of facts on the Kennedy case Fensterwald said he hopes the House committee "will find useful" in its assassination probe.

Fensterwald said he hopes the committee "will make full use of its subpoena powers" and call back former CIA chief Richard Helms, whom he feels "they let slip through their fingers, and, in my opinion, is one of the few people who know the full details of this."

The Assassination Information Bureau, headed by researcher Robert Katz, moved here to be near the congressional assassinations probe. It made its local debut with a press conference featuring author Norman Mailer's endorsement of its efforts. Mailer said he suspected the congressional committee would be packed with undercover agents, but he

declined to specify what governmental body — or what *government*, for that matter — the agents worked for.

Katz, who calls himself a "conspiracy researcher," said he "feels strongly" that the FBI is still holding "materials still of value." He hopes no one will misconstrue the media reports as a "fair summary" of what is contained in the 40,001 FBI documents. Even with researchers taking more time, "we'll only be able to analyze part of the story," he said. "But by subtracting the information we now have from various sources with what hasn't been released, we'll be able to tell what they're holding back."

MEANWHILE, out at the University of California at Berkeley, there is researcher Paul Hoch. Hoch, a computer programmer, has sued the government in an attempt to obtain information about Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby from the days before the assassination that the FBI still has bottled up in its files.

Only a small portion of the available documents has been released, Hoch thinks. He wonders about whether the information he wants is in the main FBI files in Washington, anyway. His hypothesis: "If something funny had been going on between Oswald and the FBI field office, headquarters wouldn't necessarily have known about it. . . ."

A lecture at Harvard by Mark Lane, one of most visible Warren Report critics, started Hoch on his own Kennedy investigations.

And what is its fascination for him? "It's an important political issue and has been for 14 years unresolved — the consequence of coverup by politicians, and it's had an effect on the politics of the country," he said.

PERHAPS NO ONE IS MORE eagerly anticipating the FBI's release of its second batch of Kennedy assassination documents than Lane and Freed. Both are board members of the Citizens Committee of Inquiry, one of several citizen efforts which sparked the new congressional assassination probe.

The pair now promises to reveal details of what Freed calls "a real atom bomb" if a certain FBI document which they say they obtained from Secret Service files through the Freedom of Information Act isn't among the new batch of FBI documents being released this month.

As Lane described it, it is a copy of a five-page report J. Edgar Hoover is supposed to have given Secret Service Chief James Rowley the day after the assassination. Lane claims "the Warren Commission not only never published that report; it never saw it." The report has to do with a CIA-furnished tape recording and photo of a man who might have been Oswald visiting the Russian Embassy in Mexico City Oct. 1, 1963. "It looks" in this case, said Lane, "like the CIA was setting Oswald up, with a phony tape — so that raises questions on what the CIA was *really* doing."

IT IS THE LABYRINTHIAN thinking and conjecture by assassination researchers that compels a listener to at least give them the benefit of the doubt. A difficulty arises, however, in the wide variance of their theories; unless they're all part of that big jigsaw puzzle, those pieces don't yet fit together just right.

Two of the respected researchers, Josiah Thompson and Peter Dale Scott, lean to a CIA-Mafia-exile Cubans conspiracy theory, one which has gained more popular acceptance since Watergate and its Cuban connections.

Scott, a former Canadian diplomat, said he detected "a disturbing shift in American foreign policy two days after the assassination; then I began to see a lot of intelligence links to the career of Lee Harvey Oswald." He theorized that what Oswald was linked into "had nothing to do with the assassination, but because it was linked with a sensitive operation, the government found it necessary to cover up what happened in Dallas." He arrived at this conclusion, he said, after studying the twin careers of Oswald and Jack Ruby, who had known links to the underworld. In some way, he thinks, there was a CIA-underworld conspiracy to assassinate Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

Thompson thinks it's interesting that the efforts of a group of University of Virginia law students really is what set the stage for the new congressional probe.

He's not presently involved in the probe, beyond having talked to the committee staff at their request. He still sticks to a theory of his — expressed in "Six Seconds in Dallas" — which said that the shots came from three different directions, and that, therefore, it was a carefully planned and carried-out ambush.

FINALLY, THERE IS the view of the other side.

David Belin, former Warren panel lawyer, is now in private practice in Des Moines, Iowa. He calls all the theorizing "deliberate misrepresentation."

Belin contends this "misrepresentation" permeates the writings of every person who claims Lee Harvey Oswald was not the sole gunman who killed John F. Kennedy. The misrepresentation is done in two ways, he said — either by "deliberate misrepresentation or incomplete statement of the facts," or "complete omission of facts."

As an example of the latter, he cites the apprehension of Oswald as the suspect in the slaying of Dallas police officer J.D. Tippett. The assassination researchers will ask how Oswald could have been identified in a darkened theater, he said, "but they omit the fact that the lights were turned on again when the police arrived. They also fail to mention the name of John Calvin Brewer, the shoe salesman who was a witness to Oswald's flight into his shoe store after the assassination, and whom he pursued to the theater when Oswald tried to hide there.

"There is," said David Belin, "not one single allegation that has been made about who was the gunman that can't be completely answered, if given the time."

Tom Miller
. . . Compendium of facts.

Mark Lane
. . . "Rush to Judgment."

One of the few fidelities in Ruth Dean's snide story you published New Year's Day is that I did say I do not regard my assassination inquiries "as a whodunit." Because Ms. Dean wrote a story other than she represented to me and because her interests also were not as she represented she did not ask what the focus of my work really is. And, of course, she did not at all represent this work as what it is.

In these and in other journalistic faults you serve to underscore what has become my greatest apprehension. It results from what I have learned from all this work. It is that in time of great crisis our basic institutions fail society. One of these institutions is the press. It failed in its responsibilities. Because the Star failed to hide its failure it indulges in the three-monkeys journalism in its snide and indiscriminate jesting. You also are not accurate. this story typifies.

With me you could not even get my name right, even those it is spelled correctly in the phone book, on all the covers of my books, some of which you have, and in earlier news stories, you published.

The quotes, while sometimes accurate and in context, also are entirely out of context. They have me saying what I could not have said and they have omissions that are not indicated, perhaps coming from the disguised preconceptions embodied in the piece.

With three weeks between the time Ms Dean phoned me and the time you printed her piece there is no excuse for such writing as " Weisburg (my sic) thinks of the 40,001 assassination-related documents released by the FBI ... are just 'window dressing' and contain 'little of indigestible (her sic) value.'" If by any remote chance I so misspoke myself- and to her alone among a number of reporters - what prevented her or one of your editors from asking about it? What I said and believe is that the most diligent and perceptive of reporters, alone or in teams, cannot begin to digest so vast an amount of paper and that with pressing deadlines the impossibility is total.

In the context used I could not have said what she enclosed in parens to pursue her preconcepetion and prejudices "(the local papers ignore my books and offers of inside knowledge.')" If you read the competitikn you know better, including that I have been a major and quoted source of stories critical of the House Assassinations Committee. If not by the Star, some of my FOIA suits have been reported.

and if you read either the Warren Report or your own reporting you would know that the original "conspiracy theorists" are government agencies. To the best of my knowledge the phrase originated in the CIA's unfortunate domestic activities, aimed against me and others.

But it is true that the Post has not reviewed any of my books, not the first book published about the Warren Commission or the first not in agreement ~~[illegible]~~ with the official explanation of the King assassination or any of the other five.

I did not object to her use of the word "buffs" except as applied to me. My opinion of others some of whom ~~who~~ taint the seriousness of the subject, is such that ~~it~~ your ~~the~~ putdown ~~is~~ to me is unjustified praise of them.

Nor am I a "conspiracy theorist." ~~The~~ If the Star had not been ~~as~~ so diligent ~~as it has been~~ in earning its exclusive leaks from the FBI and CIA if would know that for years I have spoken out against those whose approach is conspiracy theorizing.

But with her initial preconcpetion and her awareness of what her editors wanted fact did not intrude upon Ms. Dean's nastiness. She therefore uses me as the one example of "cpnspiracy theorists" and follows that with a paragrpah in which we are all said to "share certain charadteristis." This I suggest to more true of the Statr and such others who "do share certain chacacteristics as Screw, Hustler, The Los Angeles Free Press and the defunct Daily Worker and Quicksilver Times.

"Ever in their minds," she pontificates, "lurks the couble suspicion it 'had tobe a conspiracy and 'they (government agencies) are holding something back."

You can say the latter when supposedly writing a out the release of the first instalment of some admitted more than 50,000 pages the FBI alone did not give to the Presidential Commission? (Would you like to see thousands of those withheld by the CIA and the Secret Service - and what these records do state?)

Conspiracy may not be easy to establish as a matter of conviction but as a matter of law it is simple. It requires no more than an overt act in pursuance of an illegal end by more than one person. If more than one person was involved in the JFK assassintion the conspiracy is factual, not theoretical.

If there is evidence bearing on this those who depend on the Star for their information have no way of knowing it. There is such evidence and it is, even in the official records, without dispute.

If we are not "assassination buffs" your prejudice and intent to deprecate required

another out-down. This Ms. Dean put as "self-appointed," ddding to it the factual error "of an ever-growing group." That there now are more in number is false, as it is that we are in any sense a "group."

But are she and you less that "self-appointed" in this abject service to those who favor you with leaks? (Withthe FBI and the CIA and the JFK assassination this began at the beginning, was particularly conspicuous at the time of the Warren Report and has not ended.) Are we not a nation as readily termed "self-appointed," whether it be from our beginnings, as "self-appointed" revolutionaries or on any criticism of errant government, the requirement of decent citizenship and of representative society?

Who appointed such americans as Tom Paine, Thoreau or Lincoln Stephins? Or such others as Zola or Solzhynitsyn?

The concept and the formulation are both anti-american. Both bespeak authoritarianism.

My first book on the Warren Commission, dating to february 1965, is titled "Whitewash." The subtitle of the second, dating to 1966, includes the word "coverup." Now, when you can no longer avpid reporting the totality of accuracy in my titles from the content you were able tp perceive in those first 40,0001 pages, you serve those who for years have favored you with exclusive leaks by pretending, three weeks after your stories, that there was no "whitewash," no "coverup," and only nuts, "buffs" or the "self-appointed" would believe that the government ~~did~~ was "holding something back."

Now it even admitted it before your newest demeaning of a once-honorable institution.

Yet to you my accurate titles, my accurate writing and my accurate forecasting make me Priam's daughter? Were I in such a role the disaster I forsee is to the nation from a press represented by a long history of which this newest nastiness in service to a paying-offmaster of errant officialdom is merely the most recent illustration.